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Tuesday, May 20, 2003



Brandy Baker / The Detroit News

A proposal to expand the Great Lakes-St. Lawrence Seaway system would bring bigger ships to ports such as this one in Windsor, where the Victoriaborg refuels.

## Seaway plan pits jobs vs. ecology

Multibillion-dollar Great Lakes shipping project would expand locks, lake channels

By John Bebow / *The Detroit News*

**DETROIT** -- Tom Arlington hopes to retire from his auto industry job in a few years and turn his charter fishing sideline into a full-time business on lakes St. Clair and Erie. As Arlington ponders retirement, American and Canadian officials are studying whether to open Arlington's fishing haunts to more massive, ocean-going ships -- or finally sink the shipping industry's longtime dream of thriving, international commerce in the Great

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Lakes.

"(More shipping) could be good for the economy and that could mean more people to go fishing," said Arlington, 52, of Anchor Bay. "On the bad side, we could get a lot more trash and exotic species in the lakes. I don't think I'll advocate one way or the other."

Others are lining up, though, in a jobs-versus-the-environment debate that will have an impact the Great Lakes' economic and environmental health for years to come. The stakes for Michigan residents and the rest of the nearly 100 million people in the Great Lakes-St. Lawrence Seaway basin include:

- \* A multibillion-dollar public works project to rebuild locks and deepen shipping channels across the 2,300-mile route.
- \* A potential \$1.5 billion economic influx to the region if huge, ocean-going ships make greater use of the Great Lakes.

- \* Potential environmental costs, such as lowered lake levels and polluted waters from dredging and more invasive, exotic species that could upset the fragile balance of Great Lakes' fisheries and wildlife.

American and Canadian transportation officials agreed this month to a multiyear effort to calculate the costs of both basic repair and large-scale expansion of the Seaway-Great Lakes shipping system.

Great Lakes ports never handled much beyond core cargoes of grain, rock and ore, in part, because large, ocean-going ships outgrew the St. Lawrence Seaway almost as soon as it opened.

Shipping advocates see the study as a golden opportunity -- probably their last -- to build a thriving, international transport business envisioned when the St. Lawrence Seaway opened to fanfare 44 years ago.



Brandy Baker / The Detroit News

**Tom Arlington of Anchor Bay, who runs a charter fishing boat, has mixed feelings about the expansion of shipping on the Great Lakes. It could be good for the economy, but also pollute the lakes, he says.**

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"To do nothing is to sound the death knell before long," said Steven Olinek, deputy director of the Detroit/Wayne County Port Authority. "We're in danger of becoming the next Erie Canal unless we find ways to become more competitive."

The shipping industry's wish-list of improvements could cost \$10 billion to \$20 billion, according to preliminary estimates. Environmentalists counter it's a waste of tax dollars to spend even the roughly \$20 million it may take to fully study the expansion questions. "The problems are so immense that you don't even ask the question," said Tim Eder, director of the National Wildlife Federation's Great Lakes Natural Resource Center in Ann Arbor.

"You don't alter nature in such a radical way and threaten the most important fresh water body on the planet."

### **Shippers push project**

Two decades ago, the United Steelworkers of America represented about 1,200 dockworkers in Michigan. Today, the union represents only a couple hundred laborers who load and unload steel from Great Lakes vessels, said Harry Lester, director of Steelworkers District 2 in Taylor.

"These are jobs that pay \$15-\$20 per hour with health benefits, the kind of jobs that created the middle class in this country," Lester said. "If we get rid of all the industrial jobs to save the environment, who are we saving it for?"

Despite southeastern Michigan's manufacturing muscle, the Port of Detroit ranks 39th in the nation, shipping far less cargo than deep-water ports on America's coasts.

"Can you imagine the highway system if we'd had no new on-off ramps in the past 40 years?" Olinek asked.

Still, Great Lakes ports move more than 200 million tons of cargo a year, providing about 67,000 jobs and generating about \$5 billion in annual income, according to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

"It's impossible for me to imagine the Great Lakes region without a vibrant shipping industry, said Stephen Thorp, transportation project manager for the Great Lakes Commission, a bi-national agency overseeing environmental and economic issues in the basin. "It's what the region was built on."

Port officials and shippers on both sides of the border are trying to sell American and Canadian leaders on the idea that the region can still compete with the coasts for cargo -- if only locks along the St. Lawrence Seaway could be rebuilt and shipping channels throughout the Great Lakes could be deepened by as much as a third.

Even basic refurbishing of old locks along the Seaway could be very expensive for cash-strapped governments, but transportation officials are willing to listen.

"The St. Lawrence Seaway is a vital economic artery to the ports of America's heartland," U.S. Transportation Secretary Norman Mineta said earlier this month.

### **Deeper channels, ports**

Over the next two years, the Army Corps of Engineers will study what it could cost for

basic maintenance just to continue operating existing locks that are up to 70 years old. Further study would put firm price estimates on large-scale improvements. It could take the rest of the decade to settle the debate.

In an early estimate, the Army Corps of Engineers suggested that deeper shipping channels, deeper ports and new locks could bring \$1.5 billion in annual economic development to the St. Lawrence Seaway-Great Lakes basin.

Shippers even argue the improvements would bring some environmental benefits. New locks might be designed to inhibit the roughly 160 invasive species -- including the sea lamprey and zebra mussel -- inadvertently imported to the Great Lakes through ship ballast water.

And, the industry contends, moving some cargo from trucks to ships could cheaply reduce the ever-increasing highway headaches in urban areas throughout the Great Lakes region.

"For less than the cost of a fast-food meal, we can move one ton of cargo from Duluth to Chicago or Cleveland," said Jim Weakley, president of the Cleveland-based Lake Carriers' Association.

### **Risks outweigh benefits**

Environmental groups argue the environmental risks of shipping expansion are much greater than the potential benefits.

Deeper dredging could stir up toxic sediments and potentially lower already low lake levels. Bigger foreign ships could create greater risks of cargo and fuel spills. And the increased traffic would mean more invasive species, not fewer, the opponents of shipping expansion argue.

In upstate New York, citizens groups and U.S. Sen. Hillary Clinton vehemently opposed even studying the shipping expansion.

"The Seaway's delicately balanced ecosystem is already taxed and jeopardized by the current volume of commercial freight vessels that travel the river," Clinton said.

So far, the study has drawn few inquiries in Michigan -- despite the fact that the outcome would impact Michigan as much or more than any other state.

"Apparently, the citizenry of Michigan doesn't have a really strong opinion on it," said project manager Wayne Schloop, who is based in Detroit.

"We haven't been able to adequately put it on the public's radar," said Lana Pollack, president of the Michigan Environmental Council.

"I think in some ways people in Michigan take their lakes for granted. We're not at all against lakes shipping. It's part of the lakes. But that does not mean that anything goes."

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## Great Lakes debate

Shippers want wider locks and deeper channels along the 2,300-mile Great Lakes-St. Lawrence Seaway so they can compete for more ocean-going cargo traffic. Environmentalists say the risks of pollution and disrupting fisheries and wildlife overshadow any possible economic benefits.



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